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AUTHOR Nabei, Toshiyo
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated Japanese students' perceptions of grammar instruction in the United States. Subjects were six university students in an intensive English course focusing on reading and writing, but also including grammar instruction, and using communicative and interactive approaches. Data were drawn from two student questionnaires, administered in Japanese, and classroom observation. Results indicate that students are most interested in learning communicative English, and do not consider grammar to be the primary goal of learning English. When grammar was taught, the students took advantage of it to practice their communicative proficiency. Implications for language instruction are drawn. The two questionnaires are appended. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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Toshiyo Nabei

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Learning grammar in the United States: A case of Japanese students

Toshiyo Nabei

University of Pennsylvania
Graduate School of Education

This is a pilot study on Japanese students' perceptions of grammar instruction in the United States. While many Japanese students attend American intensive language classrooms which have adopted communicative language teaching, they have mostly been exposed to traditional grammar-translation instruction at home. There seems to be little research on these students' perceptual gaps in reference to classrooms with different methodologies. Through questionnaire surveys and observations, Japanese students in American classrooms revealed positive attitudes toward communicative language instruction.

The role of grammar instruction in language teaching has been a controversial issue among language educators during the last two decades. In the mid-1970s, when many TESOL researchers began to value communicative competence as the objective of language education, traditional explicit grammar instruction was challenged (Celce-Murcia 1991: 460). Indeed, researchers, such as Krashen and Terrell, have questioned the role of explicit grammar instruction (Richards & Rodgers 1986: 128), because of their belief that an L2 learner acquires a second language as naturally as a child acquires his first language.

However, other researchers, such as Doughty (1991) and Long (1983), suggest that formal grammar instruction does accelerate adult learners' acquisition of a second language. These researchers currently define grammar instruction as a useful means of language learn-

ing. They consider that instruction of linguistic structures should be integrated with other linguistic perspectives such as semantics and pragmatics (Celce-Murcia 1991: 446-469, Larsen-Freeman 1989: 188-189; Savignon 1991: 268-269). They also believe that grammatical knowledge is a linguistic skill which will enable students to communicate in the target language. This interpretation of communicative language teaching embraces interactive classroom settings and encourages learners' participation in the class. Although it is difficult to develop teaching materials for these classrooms and to promote students' activities in class, some American ESL classrooms have begun to adopt this approach to teaching English (Savignon 1991: 264-267).

While some ESL teachers have promoted communicative language teaching in their classrooms in the United States, many Japanese teachers of English still adhere to the grammar-translation method (McKay 1992: 103). Since teachers and students consider success in entrance examinations for high schools and colleges to be an important goal in academic settings and believe that knowledge of grammatical rules influences the results of foreign language exams, they tend to consider mastering grammar as the primary goal of learning English (McKay 1992: 102-103). Although Christensen (as cited in McKay 1992: 103) suggests that the Japanese need to alter their teaching method from a grammar-translation approach to a reading-centered approach, the majority of Japanese teachers and students believe that the grammar-translation method is the best approach (McKay 1992: 103).

Recently, the number of Japanese students who have come to the U.S. to study English has been increasing (Tsuyuki 1991: 1063). They constitute a large proportion of foreign students in American intensive English language classrooms. They may encounter two fea-

tures of language classrooms that are different from those in Japan: intensive instruction by native English speakers and a communicative approach to teaching English. These differences may have a great impact on these Japanese students' attitudes toward language learning; however, there is little research on this issue.

This study examines a small number of Japanese students' attitudes toward grammar instruction by native speakers of English. Attitude is one of the potential sources of matches and mismatches between the teacher's intention and students' interpretations (Kumaravadivelu 1994: 35). When the perceptions match, there will be positive interaction in the classroom; however, if they do not match, there may be a breakdown in the class activity (Kumaravadivelu 1994: 34-35). The rationale behind grammar instruction in American ESL classrooms, based on American teachers' common belief in communicative language teaching, reveals significant and evident differences from that of English classrooms in Japan; thus, looking at Japanese students' attitudes toward grammar instruction by American teachers in ESL will provide valuable insights for curriculum design and evaluation for American ESL classrooms and English education in Japan.

Method

The subjects were six Japanese students studying English as a foreign language at an intensive English program (here referred to as IEP) at an urban university. They had reached the intermediate proficiency level of the Reading/Writing class. This class emphasized reading-writing connections and, especially, writing in the context of theme-based reading (S. Reid, personal communication, 1994). In order to equip students with grammatical accuracy, grammar was taught explicitly in the Reading/Writing class. This class also used

communicative and interactive approaches to teaching English. Therefore, the teachers, referred to as Teacher A and Teacher B, used interactive activities in their classrooms (S. Reid, personal communication, 1994).

Assessment of the attitudes of Japanese students toward grammar instruction was studied from two perspectives: first, the subjects' answers to two questionnaires, and second, the researcher's observation of the subjects' activities and grammatical performances in class. There were two intermediate Reading/Writing classes; the researcher attended each class once on October 13, 1994, in order to see how teachers used the grammar textbook and how students actually learned English in the classroom.

The subjects were asked to answer two questionnaires outside of class time. The Japanese language was used in each one so that subjects could fully understand the questions and express their feelings as accurately as possible. The first questionnaire, which had eight open-ended questions and three multiple-choice questions, was given on October 14, 1994; the second one, which had seven open-ended questions and 40 multiple-choice questions, was administered on November 10 and 11, 1994. The researcher decided to use a second questionnaire for two reasons. First, not enough students returned the first questionnaire, and second, she found that the questions in the first questionnaire were too broad. The first questionnaire (see Appendix for an English translation) elicited information from students about their general backgrounds, as well as their feelings and opinions about grammar instruction in Japan and the IEP curriculum. The second questionnaire (see Appendix for an English translation) shared the same concept as the first. There were three open-ended questions in which the subjects were asked to express their ideas about grammar instruction in Japan and their opinions on taking classes at IEP.

The second questionnaire had two significant question categories: expectation questions and perception questions. The expectation questions concerned subjects' motives for learning English and possible purposes for coming to the U.S.[1] The subjects were asked to evaluate the reasons for studying English and to coming to the U.S. (see Appendix, Questionnaire 2, Parts 3 and 4). The perception questions related to the subjects' reactions toward grammar instructions in each country. The subjects were asked to evaluate the English classes in each setting. (see Appendix, Questionnaire 2, Parts 5 and 6.)

These questions were placed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very much so" to "not at all." Through the expectation questions, the researcher hoped to see what kind of English (e.g., communicative or structural) they expected to learn. Through the perception questions, she expected to assess their attitudes and preferences toward different approaches to grammar instruction.

Results and Discussion

The demographic questions in the second questionnaire show the Japanese students' backgrounds. All have studied English for six years during their compulsory high school education and for some additional years (the average is 1.83 years) either in higher educational institutes or language schools. All have been in the U.S. for less than six months.

Their major interests, according to their responses in the questionnaire, in studying English relate to integrative motivation (McKay 1992: 25-27). They share, for example, strong interests in English

[1]In the process of designing the expectation questions, the researcher used as a reference the questionnaire which was used to assess attitudes of Chinese students of ESL and Japanese students of EFL by Oller, Hudson, and Liu (1977) and Chihara and Oller (1978).

language, literature, and culture (#15 in Table 1). Three students have foreign friends who motivated them to learn English (#12 in Table 1). On the other hand, they do not show instrumental motivation (McKay 1992: 25-27) in learning English with the exception of the reason "getting a better job" (#14 in Table 1). Two of the six students answered that preparing for exams in Japan was not a reason to study English.

Their major reasons for coming to the U.S. relate to their interests

Table 1: Reasons to learn English

	Most	Very	Some	Little	Not at all
9. necessary for exams	1	1	1	1	2
10. required at school	1	2	2	1	—
11. wished to come to the U.S.	2	1	1	1	1
12. had American/foreign friends	1	2	—	2	1
13. to enjoy traveling abroad	—	3	1	—	2
14. to get a better job	—	3	—	1	2
15. interested in English language, literature, and culture	1	4	—	1	—

in learning English; many of them are interested in meeting many different people (#23 in Table 2). Their high evaluations of "coming to the U.S." (#11 in Table 1) as a reason for studying English coincide with their high evaluations of "learning English" (#22 in Table 2) as reasons for coming to the U.S.

In general, the students' interests in English seem to come from their curiosity about international and/or intercultural matters. Half of them expressed interest in living (#20 in Table 2) and traveling (#13 in Table 1) abroad in relation to learning English. Along with their high interests in American culture, we can probably assume that the students are interested in communicating and interacting with Americans as well as with other foreigners.Their attitudes toward learning English relate to the styles of English teaching in the two countries. There is an interesting contrast between styles of English grammar instruction in Japan and in the U.S. The students think

Table 2: Reasons to come to the U.S.

	Most	Very	Some	Little	Not at all
16. to see U.S. society	—	—	2	3	1
17. to get an education/degree	1	1	—	2	2
18. to join a family member	—	1	1	—	4
19. to be away from Japan	1	—	2	1	2
20. to live abroad	2	1	2	1	—
21. parents want me to go abroad	1	1	1	1	2
22. to learn English	2	3	—	—	1
23. to meet many people	2	3	—	1	—

grammar instruction in Japan is not very helpful in terms of actual language skills. Some students gave positive evaluations of grammar instruction in regard to reading and writing; however, others gave negative evaluations to the same categories (#27-30 in Table 3). While they negatively evaluated grammar instruction in Japan, these Japanese students positively evaluated the grammar instruction they received in the U.S. (#39-42 in Table 4). Four of the six students thought that grammar instruction in Japan was helpful for preparation for exams (#31 in Table 3), while one of the five students thought instruction in the U.S. was somewhat helpful for exam preparation (#43 in Table 4). While half of the students thought they learned "little" in the area of useful language rules in Japan, all students thought that they learned "very" or "somewhat" useful language rules in American classrooms (#24 in Table 3 and #36 in Table 4).

The students' reactions to the languages used for grammar instruction were interesting; explanations of grammar in Japanese did not help all students. Only half of the students answered that grammatical explanations in Japanese were of some help (#25 in Table 3). In the first questionnaire, one student commented, "I prefer grammatical explanations in Japanese because I am capable of understanding such explanations now." This comment may indicate that students are overwhelmed with grammatical terminology even in their native language. As for the question about instructional language in

Table 3[2]: Evaluation of English Grammar class in Japan

	Most	Very	Some	Little	Not at all
24. learn useful rules of English	—	—	3	3	—
25. explanations in Japanese were helpful	—	1	3	2	—
26. examples from teacher were helpful	—	—	2	3	—
27. useful for reading English	—	2	—	4	—
28. useful for writing English	—	4	—	—	2
29. useful for hearing English	—	—	1	1	4
30. useful for speaking English	—	—	1	1	4
31. useful for preparing for exams	—	4	2	—	—
32. textbook was interesting	—	1	1	2	2
33. the class was mechanical	2	1	1	—	2
34. the class was conversational	—	—	—	1	4
35. enjoyed doing assignments	—	1	1	1	3

the U.S., half of the students think explanations in English are of some help (#37 in Table 4). In the first questionnaire, three of the five students who responded to the question about explanations in English by saying that they "sometimes cannot understand what teachers say." Those who made negative comments about explanations in English in the first questionnaire also mentioned that they sometimes became confused when they compared the explanations given in American classrooms and in Japanese classrooms. They sometimes thought that their understandings of grammar and usage contradicted the explanations from American teachers. According to the first questionnaire, the Japanese students thought their grammar textbook in this program was easier than those they used in Japan. In American classrooms, they seemed to appreciate the teachers' examples; two of the five students thought the examples were most helpful (#38 in Table 4).

Undoubtedly, these Japanese students enjoy studying English in a communicative setting because this fits their major interests. For

[2]Some students did not answer some of the questions in this section.

Table 4[3]: Evaluation of English class at IEP (R/W class)

	Most	Very	Some	Little	Not at all
36. learn useful rules of English	—	3	2	—	—
37. explanations in English were helpful	—	—	2	2	—
38. examples from teacher were helpful	2	—	1	2	—
39. useful for reading English	1	2	2	—	—
40. useful for writing English	1	2	—	2	—
41. useful for hearing English	—	2	2	1	—
42. useful for speaking English	2	1	1	—	1
43. useful for preparing for exams	—	—	1	2	1
44. textbook was interesting	—	2	2	1	—
45. the class was mechanical	—	—	1	1	3
46. the class was conversational	2	1	—	1	—
47. enjoyed doing assignments	—	—	1	1	2

most of them, learning grammar is less important. They evaluated grammar instruction as less important because they had less interest in succeeding in language exams. In one class the researcher observed[4], Teacher A gave a rather ambiguous explanation of a sentence from the grammar exercise. She commented that the following sentences are both correct: "Mr. Clark, an elementary school teacher, explained to his students that the sun rises in the east" and "Mr. Clark, an elementary school teacher, explained to his students that the sun rose in the east." She explained that the first sentence was correct because the subordinate clause was a permanent fact, and the second sentence was also correct because the main and subordinate clauses had tense agreement. A Korean student complained about this explanation because he wanted a concrete answer which he could apply to the TOEFL test. However, this was not the case with the Japanese students because they did not consider preparation for exams very important in the U.S. (see #43 in Table 4.). Indeed,

[3]One student did not answer this section at all. Some students did not answer some of the questions in this section

[4]Observation date: October 13, 1994

according to their answers in the first questionnaire, these Japanese students were not planning to pursue higher education in the U.S. (question # 5).

These Japanese students think learning English from an American teacher is advantageous and beneficial because they can more easily acquire communicative proficiency. Five of the six students answered positively to the open-ended question about learning English from an American teacher. They commented that learning from American teachers is helpful for improving their pronunciation and conversational skills. One student wrote that he enjoyed learning English from American teachers because he could use and practice the structures he learned in his conversation with them.

These answers probably affirm the value of "talking practice" in class[5]. After explaining the structures using the modal auxiliaries, "can" and "could," Teacher B let students choose partners and ask for information about what the partner could do at home that he could not do here in the U.S. For example, in response to his peer interviewer's question, "What could you do in Japan that you can't do now,"one Japanese student said, "I could taste good Japanese food," which elicited his peer's clarification question, "eat?" Once they began this activity, their questions and answers developed into a real conversation because the students did not give or receive simple answers. Sometimes they could not understand what their partners said because of other grammatical mistakes or cultural differences. As a result, they had to clarify what their partners said or ask for detailed explanations in order to get ready to present their responses to the class.

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[5]Observation date: October 13, 1994

Conclusion

Through this study, the researcher found that these Japanese students are more interested in learning communicative English and do not consider grammar as the primary goal of learning English. When English-speaking teachers gave grammatical instruction, these students took advantage of it to practice their communicative proficiency. In reality, American intensive English teaching programs, which adopt a communicative approach, seem to provide Japanese students with what they seek — communicative language instruction. The students surveyed were satisfied with this type of program.

This study of Japanese students' attitudes toward and perceptions of explicit grammar instruction in an American language institute in comparison to those in English classrooms in Japan gives us some insights about communicative language teaching. First, the Japanese students' affirmation of the IEP curriculum may be a good sign for further promotion of communicative language teaching in ESL classrooms. When combined with an interactive task, structural practice becomes a meaningful activity and an effective integration of grammar with other language skills. Second, the Japanese educational system might need to adjust its plans for English language instruction and methodology because there seems to be diversity in Japanese students' motivations for learning English.

It is, however, insufficient and even dangerous to draw generalizations in terms of English education both in the U.S. and in Japan from this survey of six Japanese subjects in one American language institute. We should not ignore the fact that many Japanese students in Japan are preparing for examinations and may have different needs and perceptions of language education. In order to generalize Japanese students' perceptions of English grammar instruction and its role, we need more subjects and further study in different settings in the U.S. and in Japan.

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Toshiyo Nabei, a native of Japan, is a master's student in the TESOL program at the University of Pennsylvania. She holds a B.A. from Hendrix College in Arkansas. Her current research interest is students' interaction within their learning process.

Appendix

Questionnaire 1

1. How long did you study English in Japan? _____
2. Where and how did you study English in Japan? (Choose multiple selections if necessary.)
   a) High school and College
   b) Special English/Language School
   c) Self-study by radio, TV, and/or Cassette tapes
   d) Other (specify)
3. What did you think of English grammar instruction in high school?
   a) I liked it.
   b) I did not like it, but I studied English hard.
   c) I did not like it, so I did not study English hard.
   d) Other.
4. How long have you been in the U.S.? (How many months? How many years?)
5. Why do you attend this intensive English program at this university?
6. What do you think of the Reading/Writing class in the IEP?
7. What do you think of the grammar textbook, *Grammar Plus*? Do you think it is easy or difficult? Do you like it or not? Why and why not?
8. What do you think when the teacher in the IEP gives you grammatical explanations? (Choose multiple answers if necessary.)
   a) I can understand very well.
   b) I sometimes can not understand what she explains.
   c) I can not understand what she says.
   d) My grammatical knowledge from Japan helps me.
   e) I get confused because of my grammatical knowledge from Japan.
   f) Other opinions:
9. Do you think that the grammatical instruction you receive in the Reading/Writing class is helpful in terms of actual reading and writing? How?
10. Do you think that grammatical instruction you receive in the Reading/Writing class is helpful in terms of actual conversation outside of classroom?
11. How grammar instruction in the Reading/Writing class in the IEP is different from that in Japanese English grammar class? What do you suggest to make the IEP grammar instruction better?

Questionnaire 2

This question is designed to study attitudes of Japanese students toward English grammar instruction in the United States. Please answer all the questions to the best of your knowledge. Your answers will be kept in confidence. Thank you for your cooperation.

Part 1

Answer the following questions.

1. Sex
2. Age
3. How many years have you spent studying English in Japan? (Include all kinds of schools.)_____ years.
4. In which educational institute did you study English in Japan?
   a) Junior High
   b) Senior High
   c) Language School
   d) Two-year College (Major:)
   e) Four-year College (Major:)
5. How long have you been in the United States? _____ years _____ months

Part 2

Answer the following questions.

6. What do you think of English education, especially grammar instruction, in Japan?
7. What do you think about learning English from native English speakers?
8. What do you think of this intensive English program?

Part 3

Listed below are some of the reasons people have for learning English as a foreign language. Please indicate by choosing the appropriate number from the scale how important each reason is for YOU PERSONALLY.

Each number of the scale indicates the degree as follows:

1. most important
2. very important
3. quite important
4. a little important
5. not at all important

9. To pass school entrance exams.
   (most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

10.Was required to study English in high school.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
11.Had long planned to come to the U.S.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
12.Had American/foreign friends before coming here.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
13.In order to enjoy traveling abroad.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
14.In order to get a better job.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
15.Interested in English language, literature, culture.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

Part 4

Listed below are some of the reasons people have for coming to the United States to study. Please indicate by choosing the appropriate number from the scale, how important each reason is for YOU PERSONALLY.
Each number of the scale indicates the degree as follow:

1.most important
2.very important
3.quite important
4.a little important
5.not at all important

16.Seeing U.S. society.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
17.Getting an education or a degree in the U.S.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
18.Joining a family member here in the U.S.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
19.Having a chance to be away from home.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
20.Having a chance to live in another country.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
21.Parents wanted me to come.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
22.Learning English.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
23.Meeting many different people.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

Part 5

Think of each sentence listed below as it might relate to English Grammar class that YOU attended IN JAPAN. Indicate by choosing an appropriate number from the scale how much degree you agree with the sentence.

Each number of the scale indicates the degree as follow:

1.most
2.very
3.quite
4.a little
5.not at all

24.I learned useful rules of the English language in the class.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

25.Teacher's explanations were easy to understand because of the language used.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

26.Teacher's explanations were easy to understand because of the examples.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

27.The class was helpful for reading English books.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

28.The class was helpful for writing English compositions.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

29.The class was helpful for listening to spoken English.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

30.The class was helpful for speaking in English.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

31.The class was useful for preparing for exams.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

32.The textbook was interesting.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

33.The class was mechanical
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

34.The class was communicative.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

35.Doing assignments was enjoyable
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)

Part 6

Think of each word listed below as it might describe English Grammar instruction/materials that YOU have in Reading/ Writing class at IEP. Each number of the scale indicates the degree as follows:

1.most
2.very
3.quite
4.a little
5.not at all

36.I knew useful rules of the English language in the class.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
37. Teacher's explanations were easy to understand because of the language used.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
38.Teacher's explanations were easy to understand because of the examples.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
39.The class was helpful for reading English books.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
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(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
42.The class was helpful for speaking in English.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
43.The class was useful for preparing for exams.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
44.The textbook was interesting.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
45.The class was mechanical
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
46.The class was communicative.
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)
47.Doing assignments was enjoyable
(most) 1———2———3———4———5 (not at all)